9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
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114 221 settlement, the baile or townland, kept its significance and its importance. In many cases what has passed for nomadism has been the ancient and normal practice of seasonal movement to the hill pastures, which is still not entirely abandoned and has left many traces in the life and landscape of the country (Chapter 6).

181 462 In essentials Ireland is and has been a peasant country, and it may be well to examine objectively some of the general characteristics of peasant society. A permanent link with the soil on which man lives and works is the essence of a peasantry; and in this work of the fields woman co-operates with man. For her, however, field work is a secondary task since her main interests must lie in the house and in the milking of the stock. Work with spade and plough and the care of the draught animals is for the men, although carrying—necessarily done by women in primitive communities where the men must have their hands free to use their weapons—often remains an activity of the peasant woman where not entirely superseded by animal transport. Where fishing and shore-collecting engage the men's attention the women's sphere of action and responsibilities are widened.

181 323 Among tasks in which the women of some peasantries play a leading part is the making of domestic pottery, but this tradition, though strong in Neolithic Ireland, gave way to the use of metal "pots" and vessels of wood, the making of which was the work of the men. Nor have local survivals of hand-made pottery, like the Barvas ware of the Hebrides, been recorded here.

181 443 1796 Periodic gatherings for exchange and social intercourse are a feature of peasant life which has contributed to the growth of towns. The immemorial meetings in fairs and markets have been weakened by modern means of transport and by government marketing boards; and in some parts of the country the whole fabric of rural society is being undermined in consequence. As in North Africa to-day, the fairs were often held near some ancient burial place, and the assemblies were linked with religious festivals which brought

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VI

POTS AND PANS

323 415 STORIES of 'the crock of gold' remind us of the superstitions which have gathered around the humble unglazed vessels of baked clay used in prehistoric times for domestic and funerary purposes. The novel art of pot-making—the magic transformation of soft clay into indestructible pottery—must have made a deep impression on the native mind when introduced into Atlantic Europe from the Mediterranean region some forty centuries ago. It symbolized, too, a new way of life, for it accompanied the revolutionary arts of food-production and the establishment of settlements which were more or less permanently fixed to the soil. The possession of pottery greatly facilitates cooking and boiling and marks the beginning of the long line of peasant soups, stews and porridges. But primitive pottery does not stand up to hard use and the wastage was great—to the delight of archaeologists. For prolonged stewing metal vessels were preferable, and in Ireland 'the pot', in recent centuries, invariably refers to the three-legged iron cooking pot. Life revolves about the fire and the pot, and it was remarked during famine years that victims 'clung to the pot when all else had gone'.

172 For the archaeologist potsherds are an invaluable guide to changes of culture. Clay vessels had religious as well as domestic significance, and we know that as the Bronze Age advanced through the second millennium B.C. the domestic food vessel was adopted as a cinerary urn, and the deposition of cremated bones in urns continued in Ireland into the Christian era. Earlier, some of the megalithic cults had involved the offering to the dead of enormous quantities of broken pots. In

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a late Neolithic burial cairn at Lyles Hill near Belfast I found tens of thousands of potsherds which had been collected from domestic refuse and thrown into the cairn during the course of its erection.[1] The broken plates which may be seen exposed on the graves in some old burial-grounds in Co. Mayo are probably placed there in continuation of ancient practice. The breaking of pots is one of the elements in Hallowe'en pranks—one might almost say rites—and again we notice the association with the dead, for All-Hallows is the time when the dead are believed to return to their homes.

It would appear that by breaking a pot you broke its spirit; and by transference the power of the dead to do harm. Readers will recall the significant lines from *Hamlet*, referring to the suicide of Ophelia: 'Her death was doubtful . . . for charitable prayers, shards, flints and pebbles should be thrown on her.'[2] In some places in south-west England potsherds figure in the 'lent crocking' rites at Easter: like Easter eggs they are symbols of fertility. The association of fertility and decay, of life and death, comedy and tragedy, is clearly displayed in the wake games which are described in Chapter XX. This association, we note in passing, is ever-present in the mind of the Irish countryman, and the juxtaposition gives dramatic quality to the work of many Anglo-Irish playwrights.

This is not the place to enlarge on the technology of early pot-making, but it may be observed that the designs, fabric and finish of the Neolithic family of pottery in Ireland were far superior to those of succeeding periods: indeed it was not until wheel-made pots found local markets in the medieval towns that technically superior vessels were made in this country. In late prehistoric and early historic times the wealthy were able to import fine wares in small quantities from the continent, but the peasant homes over most of Ireland apparently did without pottery—the Gaelic word for potter is a loan-word—and vessels of wood, metal or leather did duty for the now universal imported 'delph'. The Dutchman, Gerard Boate, writing in 1645, said that 'the use of earthen vessels hath been very rare among them, and to the most part unknown even

[1] E. E. Evans, *Lyles Hill: a late Neolithic site in Co. Antrim*, H.M.S.O. (1953).
[2] *Hamlet*, Act V, Sc. 1.

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323 until these very last times, although a great number of English
415 potters have set up their trade'.[1] No tradition of hand-made pottery survived in Ireland as it did in the Barvas ware of Lewis in the Hebrides. On the other hand another ancient craft
415 of prehistoric origins persisted into living memory in the making
322 of wooden noggins in which milk and porridge were taken. They are small stave-built vessels of oak, having one stave projecting

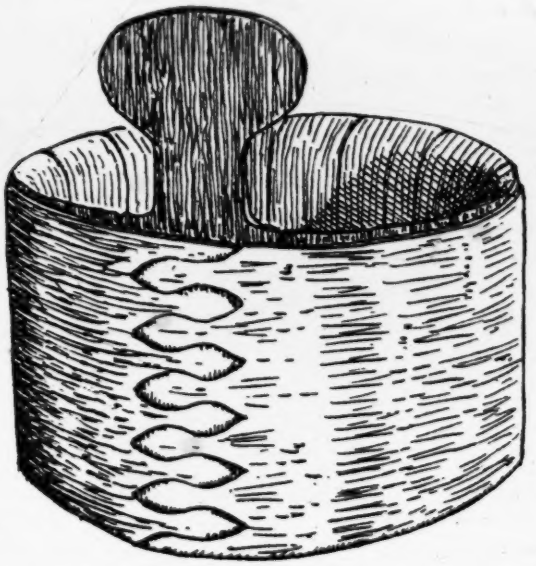

FIG. 22. Wooden noggin, Co. Down. Height of rim, 3 in.

to serve as a handle. The staves are held together and the single-piece base kept in place by a thin band of ash joined by inter-
[171] locking tongues (Fig. 22). This method of fastening the wooden band is found on the similar 'piggins' of parts of Britain, also in Scandinavia and throughout the Asiatic Arctic region, and it may well derive in these islands from an ancient circumpolar culture. The noggins were made by skilled craftsmen who

[1]Gerard Boate, *Ireland's Natural History* (1652), 159.

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were known as noggin weavers. Cheap delph has now taken the place of the noggin, but the word survives in a phrase I have heard applied to a child who is thriving on his food: 'he wants a stave out of his noggin'.

The art of pot-making declined and in many parts of the country almost disappeared after the late Bronze Age, when bronze cauldrons came in to provide serviceable cooking-vessels. Some archaeologists have related this decline to the climatic deterioration of the late Bronze Age, but it is more reasonable to associate it with an increase of pastoral pursuits and a diet of whitemeats. The bronze cauldrons were highly prized: from Gaelic literature we know that they were the special property of the head of the house and they seem to have taken on something of the magic of the early pots. They were sometimes credited with strange virtues such as the ability to yield to each guest the piece of flesh to which his rank or occupation entitled him, and they occupy a prominent place in folk-lore and legend.

It is interesting to notice that the bulk of the earliest prehistoric pots in Ireland are of plain brown burnished earthenware, faithful copies of the leather prototypes proper to a pastoral people. This western European Neolithic pottery is one of the indications of a common substratum in the early civilizations of Atlantic Europe. The round-bottomed vessels simulated round-bellied leather containers, which may well have continued to be used for cooking into historic times. We know that whole cow-hides were employed for the purpose in Elizabethan times. This is undoubtedly a survival of older custom: we find it among hunting peoples, for example the Indians of Labrador are in the habit of preparing broth in a vessel made from the belly of a caribou. A relic of the substitution of pots for skins may perhaps be seen in the persistent Irish belief that the money obtained from the sale of a cow-hide should be used for the purchase of a metal vessel. The Scots, as Froissart and Burt tell us, cooked their beef in skins stretched on four stakes. Fynes Moryson says of the Irish: 'Flesh they seethe in a hollow tree lapped in a raw cow's hide, and so set over the fire.'[1] From prehistoric times we have many ancient

[1]Fynes Moryson, *The Description of Ireland*, 228.